New Fiction

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ways there is courage and the hint of fire—that fire of life which may burn but without which there would be only the Dark House, terror, loss and loneliness. It is a book into the writing of which has gone much experience of life and a stout apprenticeship to art, and which expresses a philosophy that is kind and wise because it has looked deep into the hearts of men and women undismayed by the evil there because it has found the good both stronger and more vital. H. H. OSKISON.

THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR. By William Rose Benet. George H. Doran Company.

THIS is Mr. Benet's first appearance as a novelist, although it is far from being a first book. We shall doubtless hear so many references to him as "one of the ablest of our younger writers," that it may be worth while to point out that he is no tyro, and that while a man still on the under side of forty is entitled to be called young one does not need to suggest callow youth of him. It is more to the point to observe that Mr. Benet is writing out of a full maturity, of experience with life and a quite grown-up understanding. He has been giving us poetry of a very high order for a good many years, and he has also been long recognized as an essayist and critic whose opinions count for something.

Thus he comes to the undertaking of writing a novel with an unusually well ripened knowledge of technic and full sophistication. He demonstrates in this story that he has the narrative faculty in addition to the great gifts he has already displayed. It is a very good story, indeed, both in its central theme and in execution. If it is not entirely or unqualifiedly a success that may be because it is sometimes a little too artful, even sometimes unnecessarily complex. He makes too much of the mystification and misunderstanding among his people toward the end of the book, which is a bit too long drawn out.

The mechanism of his narrative is quite out of the common forms, but he controls it smoothly, so that it performs to strikingly good effect. The scheme is somewhat of the technic of the theater, and its most potent element is its irony of situation. The plot throughout is translucent to the reader. It is not wholly a game played with all the cards face down, but, to revert to the theater for illustration, the audience is always aware of what is going on, being in the confidence of the dramatist, but the actors themselves are not. The spectator knows just who each masquerading characters really is and what may be expected, but the people on the stage do not. It gives room for an abundance of fine "situations," and the writer makes the most of them.

To any of the numerous admirers of his verse it is hardly necessary to say that the verbal finish, the polish of the style is admirable, though now and then there is a kind of staccato touch that is not altogether happy. One would not notice it at all except in the care of so fine a stylist.

The character drawing is always subtle, penetratingly intelligent, delicate and given in chromatic completeness. The men are especially good, with perhaps a little qualification as to Richard, one of the leading gentlemen, who is occasionally a little stagey. But as to that who is not sometimes a little stagey in real life?

The motive of the story—or stories, for it is really a composite of several distinct but nicely interwoven threads—is the difficult functioning of an artistic conscience and the troubles such an uncomfortable possession may create for its owner. It is present in two feminine incarnations: a lady who started out with lofty ideals, had a hard time of it, and was clever enough to turn to excessively popular pot boiling, and another lady, who had the true divine fire and was unable to do anything but keep it burning at high pressure until she is almost consumed in the steady conflagration. Flora (to use one of her names) has written ten best sellers when the story opens, but she is fully aware of just how bad they are. Her conscience at last gets the better of her and she decides to reform—especially as she can now afford to do so.

At that point one is, it may be, not quite convinced. Is it really possible for the possesor of true genius to produce, deliberately, and for purely commercial reasons sentimentality to suit the half million audience? One rather suspects that the maker of such popular successes must believe in them and enjoy doing them to succeed. Has any one ever suspected Harold Bell Wright of being capable of a "Trilby" for example or, let us say, another "Pendennis"?

Nevertheless Mr. Benet "gets away with it" well enough, and Flora is an engagingly feminine creature. One ends by believing in her. The other girl is a shadowy figure, for the most part in the background, but tensely real when she does materialize. The other women, the youthful Bessie and the vinegary village gossips are masterpieces of character drawing.

One of the finest elements in the book is the picture of the Pennsylvania village, or small town, to which Flora makes a theatrical retreat when her conscience drives her away from pot boiling. Most of the play is staged there, and the atmosphere of it all is perfect. So, too, he is entirely happy in his sketches of the magazine editorial rooms, with its eccentric lions gently roaring about the premises. In all his stage scenery he is manifestly working from the living model with a masterly sureness of outline and accuracy of detail.

The movement of the plot is exceedingly intricate, but entirely orderly. It is a process of picking up one thread after another and weaving them all together into a final pattern: a process that demands the reader's attention. But this book is not for the slipshod superficial reader. Reduced to its skeleton the plot is even a little melodramatic, but it is all made thoroughly alive. The book leaves one with the certainty that if he cares to so Mr. Benet can produce novels that will find a lasting place in American literature. This one is after something of a *tour de force*, but the force is there—dynamic enough and well in hand.

H. L. PANGBORN.

THE HAUNTING. By C. A. Dawson-Scott. Alfred A. Knopf.

AMATEURS of the creepy in fiction, the ghost story that makes one apprehensive of dark corners, and leaves one with the conviction that whatever Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and other Spiritualists may or may not have "proved," the spook can be a tremendously real thing in literature will find a banquet to their taste in this extraordinary story. And it is a great deal more than a ghost story. It is a very knowingly worked out psychological study, not merely of the inexplicable but also of every day mortals who are not at all visionary. It is one of a series of four novels, dealing with the "handicaps of life" in a large way, staged for the most part in Cornwall and told in truly moving manner. Some of the author's earlier stories, "The Headland" and "The Rolling Stone," have received considerable critical approval, both here and in England, but her work should be more widely known. It is very far above the average both in technique and in the orignality of her thought.

The way is methodically prepared for the creation of the "Ha'nt." The reader is practically notified early in the story that Pascoe, the younger of the two Corlyn brothers, is going to be made into a ghost by Gale, his miserly elder brother. The author's management of the atmosphere of apprehension, of the feeling of a coming horror, is uniquely impressive. The brothers disagree about money, and you know that Gale is going to be the murderer, but there is nothing downright or clumsy about the narrative. And there is a shudder in it when the two brothers are carrying on an apparently commonplace dialogue, merely about Pascoe's intended voyage to the West Indies and a possible return.

"When you come back, Pascoe?"

"I shall come back, you see if I don't."

"Don't make too sure."

"When a chap wants to come back he comes."

"You think you'll want to come?"

"Certain sure I shall."

An entirely innocent, unimportant conversation, but the anticipatory irony of it is shivery. Pascoe is suitably poisoned—he was a bad lot, and one wastes no sympathy on him—and he does "come back." The method of his coming is also unique. He materializes very slowly, methodically and in an increasingly hair-raising manner; but it isn't fair to betray too much.

Another striking element in it is Gale's own consideration of the ghost, his attempts to rationalize it and to keep the apparitions he sees in their proper perspective. The gradual conquest of him by the "Ha'nt" is superbly elaborated, detail upon detail, to the necessarily horrific final scene.

Interwoven with the ghostly theme, an essential part of it, is the love story of the middle aged Morwenna and Gale. Very rarely anywhere in fiction has such a difficult and inherently dangerous theme been so acutely developed. It becomes a poignant drama, going deep into the roots of human passion—always with full dignity and always free from any mawkishness; a rarely frank handling of elemental things that never offends.

There is also a value above the common in the local color of the tale and in the subsidiary people. It is a Cornish village done with the minuteness of detail of a Dutch landscape painter, but always in sound perspective and in full color. The old "witch," Rebecca; the sturdy, stodgy, kindly young farmer, Denzil, who marries the abandoned Jenifer (the girl whom Pascoe has seduced and from whom he is about to run away when he is poisoned), and Antiks, the complaisant serving woman—all these merit particular study and approval, as of interest in themselves.

It is not a book that will appeal greatly to the immature or superficial reader, but it is likely to stick in the memory of the more discerning who may happen upon it. If decided originality—originality that is not merely bizarre or extravagant—is entitled to particular attention the author of this story should be singled out of the crowd of more or less proficient writers of the day, for there is no one else who is producing just this kind of story.

HENRY WALKER.

THE UNSPEAKABLE GENTLEMAN. By J. P. Marquand. Charles Scribner's Sons.

MR. MARQUAND has been loudly announced as a "new kind of writer in his generation," and it is true that not many among to-day's aspiring youth are turning toward the type of romance he has chosen, but there is nothing whatever new about him except his own very pleasant newness, the youthful dash and exuberance of him. The tale is well told—some of it very well indeed—and is no small achievement, but is of more importance as a promise of the possibility of something better than as an earth-shaking affair in itself. It is of the school of Dumas, of the Scott of "Quentin Durward," or, to come much nearer home, of our own Tarkington in his earlier manifestations, but Mr. Marquand's actual model is Stevenson.

And that is what forces one to be just a bit severe with Mr. Marquand because there is still too much Stevenson in his book. The giant's robe flaps about his heels a little trippingly. It was Stevenson himself who advised the young writer to "play the sedulous ape," and never was better advice. Did he not demonstrate that himself? Here and there his footsteps and those of De Quincey make but one trail. Mr. Marquand, therefore, is but a worthy disciple when he falls into the very gestures of Stevenson himself—but he overdoes it, and sometimes emerges into an unhappy exaggeration.

Nevertheless, now and then for a swift almost rapturous moment he does it so very well indeed that one feels almost as if he were happening upon a hitherto unknown fragment of R. L. S. himself. The illusion passes, but it has been—and therein lies a proof that Mr. Marquand has made no mistake in choosing his vocation, and also a promise that perhaps in time to come when he shall dare to fashion his literary garment more suitably to his own figure, we may expect much of him.

There is not the slightest hint of plagiarism or of too much likeness either in character or plot in saying that one is reminded of "The Master of Ballantrae." But here we have a master who is protesting too much about his supreme wickedness, who is much too talkative. Stevenson carried that just as far as it is safe; to go further is to court disaster. Stevenson's characters are prone to run into self-exposition at slight excuse, but they never pass the probable bounds of volubility, whereas the "Unspeakable Gentleman" does. Almost he makes a monologue of the book. One makes excuses for him—he drinks so mery many quarts of Madeira (and rum), but he never shows the effects of that in any other way than overtalkativeness. His sword play and fist play do not suffer, but his tongue runs on and on—and on. . . .

One would like wholly to approve this book, for much of it is so very good. But under the circumstances one is forced to point out that if Stevenson himself had been doing it he would surely have rewritten some very rough places, would have repressed the too insistent detail, would have brought into prominence some important matters left a little vague—and, what a story he might have made of it! This rather comment is justified because, if it were Stevenson himself reincarnated, no doubt there are passages that he would leave unchanged—and it is hard to express higher praise than that. He would have let stand the account of the fight on the Sea Tern, in which Capt. Shelton retakes his ship almost single handed—yes, that is a superb bit of romance.

It is all a story of galloping incident, swift narrative, tremendously alive. As such it is a welcome change from the morbidities and posings of an overanalytical age. The plot turns upon a conspiracy against Napoleon. There is a mysterious paper dealing with the conspiracy, and there are men—many of them—after the document. The "Unspeakable Gentleman," who is after all something of a poseur and not really so dreadfully wicked as he pretends to be, has the prize and will neither destroy nor give it up. His son believes in his villainy and tries to frustrate him—sometimes one feels a little stupidly—and the useful heroine hangs around understandingly, but rather in the background, until everything is nicely settled. The minor characters are all well placed in the picture, excellently done. It is immensely readable; clean, bright, wholesome and inspiriting.

Mr. Marquand has gone to one of the very best of schools, and has shown himself a superbly clever pupil. Doubtless one may feel pretty sure that when he next goes adventuring he will be able to walk more firmly all by himself, a litle more out of the master's footsteps.

GEORGE WOOD.

LADY BOUNTIFUL. By G. A. Birmingham. George H. Doran Company.

ANY one who has once fallen under the spell of Mr. Birmingham will open any new volume bearing his name with an anticipatory smile, and unless the smile has to stop till the cloud of one of his more serious moods rolls by it will continue throughout the book, and recur at intervals as one chews

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